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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BRIDGETOWN 000036

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WHA/CAR FOR ALAIN NORMAN
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [EAID](#) [SC](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: TEMPERERS, CARS SET ABLAZE BY ST. KITTS ELECTORAL
REFORM MEASURES

REF: 07 BRIDGETOWN 1548

¶1. (U) Summary: Following the passing of electoral reform law in December 2007 in St. Christopher (St. Kitts) and Nevis, tempers have flared as the opposition has raised objections to the ruling Labour party's implementation of re-registration rules. In what has devolved into a vicious battle in the local press, the opposition People's Action Movement (PAM) has accused the ruling Labour Party of preventing access to registration records, and one of the PAM's agents was arrested and detained while trying to view these documents. The Manager of Elections' vehicle was subsequently torched, causing further escalation of the war of words, amid suspicions that the PAM was resorting to violence in its opposition to the new laws. End Summary.

Re-Registration Slipped Into Legislation

¶2. (SBU) On December 13, 2007, the St. Kitts and Nevis parliament passed amendments to its election laws. After parliamentary debate on the bill had concluded, the concept of requiring registered voters to apply in person to "re-confirm" their registration was introduced into the legislation by the ruling Labour Party (during the "committee stages" of the bill). Since the Labour Party has a very large majority in parliament, the bill was easily passed, even with the new section on re-registration. Meant to address concerns about the integrity of the voter's list, the intent was that every citizen that re-registered with the Electoral Office by appearing in person would then receive a new national ID card. The official Leader of the Opposition Mark Brantley of the Concerned Citizen's Movement (CCM) of Nevis told PolOff that the addition of the re-registration article was a "last minute invention" by the government.

¶3. (U) In late December, and in the middle of the Christmas holidays and the nation's carnival celebrations, Prime Minister Denzil Douglas announced that the re-registration process would be open from December 27, 2007 until September 30th, 2008. As soon as the process began, the opposition People's Action Movement began complaining that the Electoral Office had no procedure for the general public to know who or how many persons have re-registered. Since the PAM had boycotted debate of the bill due to its objections to the electoral reform process, and since the re-registration section was slipped in during the committee stage, the opposition parties had not previously had an opportunity to object to the "re-confirmation" exercise.

¶4. (SBU) In a private conversation, PAM's leader Lindsay Grant (a dual U.S.-St. Kitts citizen) told Poloff that while the general public still has access to daily logs of persons registering for the first time, without records of who is re-registering, there is no way for the PAM or other citizens to know which individuals will be eligible to receive a new national ID card; furthermore, since the ruling Labour Party is well-known to have a large constituency living abroad in the United States and the United Kingdom, the lack of any records could potentially facilitate them falsely claiming that nationals have returned from abroad to re-register. In Grant's opinion, this possibility negates any benefits that would have otherwise resulted from the new legislation and the process of re-registration. Mark Brantley of the CCM told Poloff that at least 50 percent of each official's campaign budget is traditionally spent on the "busing" practice, and he mentioned that he has made calls in parliament for the introduction of campaign finance laws.

Tempers Flare...

¶5. (U) As soon as the election laws were passed in December, political rhetoric on the divisive issue began to escalate. In mid-December the St. Kitts/Nevis Observer newspaper published an editorial titled "How Many Will Die?", suggesting that the poor handling of electoral reform would lead to highly disputed and possibly violent elections in the future. Minister of State for Information Nigel Carty, who has been the Labour Party's most outspoken defender of the election laws, sharply criticized the newspaper for "irresponsible" journalism, and himself engaged in an ongoing

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war of words with Grant in the local media. (Note: Minister Carty also holds the Sustainable Development portfolio, is a former Fullbright fellow, and has been a strong U.S. ally in the U.S.-Brazil-OAS biofuels initiative. End note.)

¶6. (SBU) On January 3rd the PAM sent one of its agents, Lauren James, to the Electoral Office to observe the re-registration process. When James was asked to leave and she refused, she was arrested for loitering and detained for several hours by police before later being released. The PAM immediately condemned the arrest, and the PAM general secretary told the media that the party would "shut the

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system down" if the re-registration process was not conducted in a legal and transparent way. Senior PAM leaders, including Grant, continued to visit the Electoral Office daily and vowed publicly to visit the office every day until the logs and records are released. On a local radio program, Prime Minister Denzil Douglas accused the opposition of raising the complaints in a "deliberate attempt" to undermine investors' confidence in St. Kitts.

...And then Ignite

¶7. (SBU) On January 10th, the Manager of the Electoral Office, Oliver Knight, called firefighters to his house when his Nissan Pathfinder ignited while parked in his garage. As soon as news of the fire spread the next morning, Fire Chief Hester Rawlins declared the fire an arson, and Minister Carty told local newspapers that the PAM may have been responsible for the fire. In his sharpest words to date, Carty told local media: "If they (the PAM) believe they run this country they can go ahead and pretend that they run this country. And if they feel that they are violent and they feel that they can bring disorder into this country, then the people of this country is not going to stand aside and let that happen." In sharp contrast to December when many government officials were willing to discuss electoral reform, many Embassy contacts declined to discuss recent events with

PolOff and instead referred all questions to Minister Carty.

¶8. (SBU) Several days after the fire, Acting Police Commissioner Austin Williams clarified that the investigation was still under way and that arson was only suspected in the fire. Grant and the PAM adamantly denied to the local media and to PolOff any PAM involvement. The political debate did not subside, however, and Grant and the PAM continued to complain that no statutory rules or regulations were in place to govern the re-registration process.

Election Officials "Making It Up As They Go Along"

¶9. The CCM's Mark Brantley then joined the PAM in criticizing the lack of re-registration rules and calling for more transparency in the process. Whereas in an early December meeting with PolOff he had noted that the CCM was pleased with the amicable, open, and transparent manner in which the government had conducted the electoral reform debate, he described the addition of the re-registration article as "dropped like a thief in the night". He expressed the CCM's concerns that the new rules "run the risk of people being disenfranchised" and he noted that whereas the re-confirmation process should have had clear regulations published before hand, no such rules have been published to date. Saying he thinks "the electoral officials themselves are confused", Brantley accused the government of making it up as they go along" in regards to the re-registration process. He noted that in his constituency in Nevis, elections offices didn't have cameras to take the voter ID photographs.

¶10. (U) Even though Minister Carty had initially claimed that the election laws did not require any guidelines for the re-registration process, by January 14th the government finally acknowledged that rules should be created and published. Minister Carty told PolOff that the government hopes to have these in place by the end of January 2008. Prime Minister Douglas also gave a press conference on January 15th, emphasizing the importance of the democratic process and accusing "some individuals" of trying to create an electoral crisis and political tensions in an effort to

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advance their own interests. He furthermore announced that mobile registration stations would be provided to facilitate the process.

Elections in This Atmosphere??

¶11. (U) Despite the tensions surrounding the electoral reform issue, Prime Minister Douglas also hinted that elections could be called this year. The constitution allows him to call elections at any time, though elections will be required by October 2009. Grant, meanwhile, told PolOff that he anticipates elections in 2008 and that the PAM is "getting in campaign mode". Brantley opined that while the PM can call elections at any time, the CCM does not expect that elections will be called before the end of the re-registration period on September 30, 2008.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Though the political rhetoric in St. Kitts and Nevis has ratcheted up, it is unlikely that the disagreement will result in violence or public disorder, and the alleged arson is likely an isolated event. In many ways, the pressure brought by the PAM and the CCM have forced the government to be more transparent in their operations, which is certainly good for the nation's democratic process. Still, the government's initial lack f transparency, and the aforementioned rules allwing nationals living abroad to be brought in for elections (reftel), remain areas of concern.

End comment.
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